

# Goosebumps®

SERIES 2000

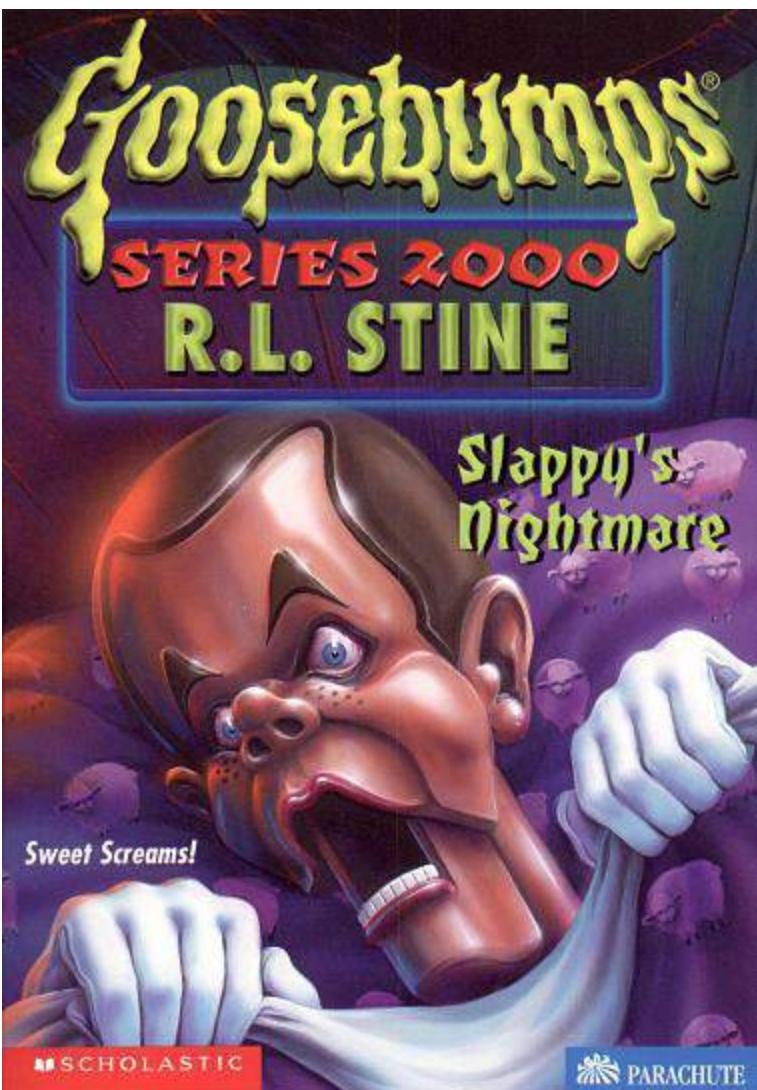
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## Slappy's Nightmare

*Sweet Screams!*

SCHOLASTIC

PARACHUTE



# 1

Jimmy O'James adjusted the sleeves on his black turtleneck sweater. He nervously brushed a hand back over his short brown hair. His hand felt cold and wet.

He peeked through the curtain at the audience in the theatre. The lights were dimming. But he could see the eager faces, the clapping hands. Kids leaned forward in their seats, bumped each other with their elbows, chatted in low whispers, ready for the show to start.

Jimmy took a step back from the curtain. He adjusted the ventriloquist's dummy on his arm. He brushed a piece of lint off the dummy's red-and-white-checked jacket. Then he straightened the dummy's red bow-tie.

"Keep your hairy paws off me," the dummy growled in a harsh rasp. "Touch me again and you're roadkill."

"Listen to me, Slappy —" Jimmy whispered angrily through gritted teeth. He saw a stage-

hand signalling to him. They were about to open the curtains.

Show time.

A musical fanfare blared over the loudspeakers. The kids in the audience began to quieten down.

Jimmy O'James gripped the dummy tightly. "I'm warning you, Slappy —" he whispered.

"What smells?" the dummy interrupted, wooden lips clicking as he talked, cold blue eyes darting from side to side. "Is that your breath? Or did you step in something backstage?"

"Sssshut up!" Jimmy hissed. He gave the grinning dummy a hard shake. "This is your last chance."

Slappy tossed back his head in a shrill, scornful laugh. "This is *your* last chance, Jimmy," he rasped. "Your last chance to be funny!"

A large drop of sweat ran down the side of Jimmy's face. He brushed it away with his free hand.

He glanced behind him. He saw two young crew members staring at him, watching him as he argued with the dummy.

"Uh . . . just warming up," he called to them.

"Jimmy, I have a warm-up exercise for you," Slappy growled. "Go jump off a cliff!"

On-stage, the host of the show had started to introduce them. "*Ladies and gentlemen . . . boys and girls . . . Let's put our hands together now*

*and give it up for the world's greatest ventriloquist — Jimmy O'James and his cute little pal, Slappy!"*

Applause rose up through the theatre.

"Cute little pal?" the dummy cried. "I may puke!"

Jimmy gripped the dummy's wooden neck. "Don't mess up, Slappy," he warned again. "I mean it. This is your last chance."

The painted red grin spread over the wooden face. The dummy giggled. "Don't worry. I won't let you down."

The applause thundered now.

The curtains slid apart.

Holding the laughing dummy in both arms, Jimmy ran out to begin the show.

# 2

Beads of sweat rolled down Jimmy O'James's forehead. But he had to admit the show was going pretty well. He had been on-stage for fifteen minutes, and so far there were no disasters.

"Did you forget this was a *comedy* act?" Slappy demanded. "The only thing funny up here is your *face*!"

The audience howled with laughter. Kids slapped their knees and the arms of their chairs.

They loved Slappy's rude remarks. They loved it when he insulted Jimmy. They thought it was the funniest act they'd ever seen.

If they only knew. . . Jimmy thought bitterly. His hand shook as he took a sip from his water glass. If they only knew that it *isn't* an act.

"Jimmy, do you eat soup with your left hand or your right hand?" Slappy asked.

"My right hand," Jimmy replied.

"That's funny. I use a spoon!"

More laughter.

The dummy's voice lowered to a growl.  
"Jimmy, what would you say if I stuck a fork  
in your eye?"

"Huh?" Jimmy swallowed hard. Sweat rolled  
down his cheeks, shimmering brightly in the  
stage lights.

"What would you say if I stuck a fork in your  
eye?" Slappy demanded menacingly.

"I...I don't know," Jimmy stammered.  
"Please, Slappy, don't—"

"You'd say OUCH!" the dummy declared. He  
tossed his head back in a cruel, shrill laugh.

A few kids in the audience laughed too. But a  
lot of them remained silent.

"That's not funny, Slappy," Jimmy said, his  
voice shaking. "Let's not be mean, okay?"

"Here's a riddle!" Slappy declared. "What's  
the difference between you and a one point  
eight metre pile of yellow dog vomit?"

"Slappy—stop!" Jimmy cried sharply. "That's  
not a good riddle!"

"It's a bad riddle," Slappy cried, "because  
there is no difference! Heee heee heee."

This time, Slappy was the only one in the  
room who laughed.

A troubled hush fell over the audience. Kids  
began to whisper to each other.

Jimmy shook Slappy. "I warned you," he whispered.

Jimmy coughed. His throat felt as dry as sandpaper. He reached for the water glass again, and knocked it over.

Kids gasped as the glass shattered on the stage.

Jimmy jumped off the stool and strode toward the audience. "Hey, everybody — I have an idea," he said, forcing a smile. "Who would like to come up here and meet Slappy?"

Silence. No volunteers.

"Hey — come up here, guys! I don't bite!" Slappy cried.

"I've got a great prize for anyone who comes up on-stage to talk to Slappy!" Jimmy announced.

Several kids raised their hands.

Jimmy picked a boy in the third row. Everyone cheered and applauded as the boy jogged up the stairs.

"Be nice, Slappy," Jimmy whispered.

Slappy just laughed in reply.

# 3

The boy lumbered on to the stage. He was a big, chunky kid with short blond hair and a round pink face. He wore a blue pocket T-shirt that came down almost to the knees of his baggy khakis.

“What’s your name?” Jimmy asked him, pushing the microphone into the boy’s pink face.

“Freddy,” he replied.

“Freddy, say hi to Slappy,” Jimmy said cheerfully.

“Have you ever dived into a plate of spaghetti?” Slappy asked, leaning close until his face was nearly against Freddy’s.

Freddy laughed nervously. “Huh? Spaghetti? Why would I dive into spaghetti?”

“Because you look like a fat meatball to me!” Slappy rasped.

A few kids laughed. Several others gasped.

“Slappy, be nice —” Jimmy pleaded.

"Let's see how the big meatball tastes!" Slappy cried.

His head swung down. His mouth opened over the boy's pink ear.

Everyone in the theatre heard the *CRUNCH* as the dummy's wooden jaws clamped shut over the boy's ear.

"OWWWWWWWWW!" Freddy let out a howl of pain.

"Slappy — let go! Let go!" Jimmy screamed.

The boy stumbled forward.

Slappy came with him, tumbling out of Jimmy's arms, his wooden mouth shut tightly over the screaming boy's ear.

"HELP ME! IT HURTS! OWWWWWW! IT HURTS!"

"Slappy — I warned you!" Jimmy cried. He grabbed the collar of the dummy's red-and-white-checked sports coat and tugged.

"Let go! Let go of him now, Slappy!"

In the audience, kids were crying and screaming. Parents were shouting. Several people were running towards the stage.

"OWWWWW! GET HIM OFF!" Freddy howled in pain, his face bright red now. He slapped his hands at the dummy, trying to shove him away.

"Slappy — please!" Jimmy begged helplessly.

Kids were on their feet now. Chairs squeaked and scraped. The thud of footsteps echoed off

the walls as kids hurried to the theatre exits.

“OWWWWWWWWW!” Freddy howled in agony.

Finally, Slappy’s red-painted mouth slid open.

Freddy dropped to the stage floor.

Slappy tossed back his head, his blue eyes darting wildly. He opened his mouth and a shrill siren wail poured out.

Louder than any fire or ambulance siren, the deafening whistle rose over the cries and shrieks of the audience.

Louder... Louder...

“The doors are locked!” a woman screamed, her voice nearly drowned out by the deafening wail from Slappy’s open mouth.

“We can’t get out!”

“Let us out! Let us out!”

“My ears — it feels like there’s a knife in my ears!”

“Make him stop! Make him stop!”

“Owwwwwww! My ears! My ears are bursting!”

“Ohhh . . . it hurts! It hurts so much!”

# 4

Jimmy O'James flung open the dressing-room door. He heaved Slappy into the room.

Slappy slid across the floor and came to a stop against the peeling green wall.

Jimmy slammed the door shut behind him, slammed it so hard it popped back open again. He didn't notice.

He stormed across the tiny room and jerked the dummy up by the jacket lapels.

"The last time. . ." Jimmy choked out, almost too angry to speak. His whole body trembled. His heart pounded in his chest. "I'm telling you. That was the last time you'll ever ruin a show, Slappy."

He tossed the dummy on to the dressing-table.

Slappy's head clonked against the tarnished mirror.

He cackled. "Ruin a show, Jimmy? Are you crazy? After today, you'll be famous!"

Jimmy sighed. "I'll never work again. You destroyed my career, Slappy. I'm ruined. Ruined! Are you pleased with yourself? Are you happy now?"

Slappy crossed his legs. "You've got to get some fresh air, Jimmy," he said cheerfully. "You look terrible."

"Shut your face!" Jimmy shrieked. He took a deep breath and held it. He crossed his arms tightly over the front of his black turtleneck.

Get control, he ordered himself. Get control of yourself, Jimmy.

But it wasn't easy. Jimmy could still hear the horrified wails and cries of pain from the kids in his audience. He could still see their terrified faces, see them pressing their hands against their ears, begging him to make Slappy stop his ear-popping siren wails.

Jimmy buried his head in his hands. "I'll never work again," he repeated, his voice breaking with emotion. "No theatre will ever hire me."

Slappy giggled. "That's showbiz."

Jimmy raised his head and glared across the room at the dummy. "You'll never work again, either. I meant what I said, Slappy. Believe me. You're finished. That really was your last chance."

The dummy's wooden head shook no. "You can't get along without me."

Jimmy's eyes flashed angrily. "Oh, really?"

"Without me, you don't have an act," Slappy insisted. "Without me, you don't have anything. You're a cheap ventriloquist who moves his lips. And you wouldn't know a good joke if you heard one. Which you never have."

Slappy hopped off the dressing-table. His shiny black shoes landed with a hard *THUD* on the floor.

"You're lame," he told Jimmy. "You're lame in every way. But look what I've done for you. Tomorrow, you'll be in every newspaper in the country."

"Listen to me —" Jimmy started.

"You need me, Jimmy old boy," Slappy continued. "How else could a geek like you get in all the newspapers? So we made a few brats scream and cry. So we burst a few eardrums. Big deal! You'll be famous!"

"NO!" Jimmy shouted, breathing hard. "No! No more! You're finished, Slappy. Here. Look at this. I'll show you why you're finished."

Slappy opened his wooden lips to say something. But he stopped and stared in silence as Jimmy pulled a long crate from the dressing-room closet.

"This is why you're finished," Jimmy said, struggling to prise off the lid of the crate. "This is why I'll never need you again."

Slappy shuffled a step closer.

His cold blue eyes gazed down at the crate.  
Jimmy pulled off the lid and tossed it aside.  
"Go ahead. Take a good look," he instructed the  
dummy.

Slappy stared into the crate.  
A startled squeak escaped Slappy's throat.  
"No!" he cried. "No! I don't believe it!"

# 5

Slappy stared down in amazement at the dummy stretched out in the crate. There was no mistaking it. The dummy was his identical twin.

Slappy bent down and touched its wooden face. He peered into the dummy's eyes, cold blue eyes like his. He turned the dummy's head from side to side.

He grabbed the dummy's wrist and lifted its lifeless arm. Then he let it drop back into the box.

"Where'd you get this piece of junk?" he demanded finally.

Jimmy O'James carefully picked up the new dummy. "His name is Wally. I found him in a magic shop."

"Handsome dude," Slappy joked.

Jimmy didn't laugh. "Does he look familiar, Slappy? He was made by the same evil toy-maker who built you."

"Don't say *evil*," Slappy snapped.

"Evil," Jimmy repeated. "The toy-maker who made you was an evil sorcerer. No other way to describe him. He built you out of coffin wood and —"

"I've been coughin' ever since!" Slappy declared. He opened his mouth in a high, shrill laugh.

Jimmy's expression remained solemn. "I'm not joking," he said quietly. "Maybe Wally is an early model of you."

"Who cares?" Slappy cried angrily, kicking the side of the crate with his heavy black shoe. "You can't use him in your act, Jimmy. He doesn't have my *winning* personality!"

"But he comes with something very interesting," Jimmy replied. "Something that is going to improve my life — and *end* yours!"

"Whoop-dee-doo," Slappy muttered sarcastically. But his eyes darted nervously from side to side. And he took a step back as Jimmy placed the new dummy carefully in the box.

Then Jimmy unlatched a little door at the bottom of the crate and pulled out a stack of wrinkled yellow papers.

"You got your lunch wrapped up in that?" Slappy joked.

Jimmy ignored him. He shuffled through the pages. Then he raised his eyes to Slappy. "These are instructions," he said, "written by the toy-maker himself."

Slappy stared at the pages in Jimmy's hand and didn't reply.

"These are instructions," Jimmy continued, "on how to control the evil magic that went into your body. These pages tell how to bring this other dummy to life — and how to put you to sleep *for ever!*"

Slappy's mouth dropped open. The painted grin on his face appeared to fade. His eyes clicked open wide.

Slappy tilted his head, staring first at Jimmy, then down at his twin in the crate.

"Say goodbye, Slappy," Jimmy said coldly.

# 6

"Never!" Slappy screamed in reply. "Never! Never!"

With a cry of rage, Slappy dived for the dummy. He grabbed it in both hands and wrenched it from the crate.

With another furious roar, he swung round and slammed the lifeless dummy into the wall. Slammed it hard. Again.

Again.

The dummy's head made a hollow *CLUNK* sound each time it crashed into the wall. Its wooden hands bounced up and down helplessly as Slappy wrestled with it.

"Stop —" Jimmy demanded. "Give me that dummy, Slappy — right now!"

But Slappy opened his mouth in another cry of rage. He lowered a knee against the dummy's chest. Wrapped his hands round its slender neck.

And ripped the dummy's head off.

He tossed the head at the dressing-table. It hit the mirror and crashed to the floor.

Then he dropped the headless body back into the crate and dived at Jimmy, hands outstretched, mouth open in a hoarse, animal growl.

Startled, Jimmy tried to back away — and stumbled against a table leg.

Before Jimmy hit the floor, Slappy's hands wrapped round the ventriloquist's throat.

"Don't worry about that other dummy, Jimmy," Slappy rasped breathlessly. "I'm going to give it a nice *new* head — YOURS!"

The wooden hands clamped tighter round Jimmy's throat, and — with inhuman strength, the strength of all his evil — Slappy began to pull Jimmy's head off.

# 7

"Unnh..." Jimmy uttered a choked groan.  
"Can't... breathe..."

The light began to fade.  
The room tilted away.  
The wooden hands dug into his throat, choking him, choking him.  
A high peal of laughter rang in his ears.  
Not Slappy's laughter.  
Was he imagining it? Hearing things?  
No.

The dummy's hands slid off his neck.  
Gasping, his heart pounding, Jimmy turned to the doorway. And saw a girl.

A girl of about twelve or thirteen, with wavy dark hair and green eyes. She wore a bright yellow sweatshirt over faded denim jeans patched at both knees.

She laughed again. "That's very funny!" she declared. "You're really a riot. I think you're a great ventriloquist, Mr O'James."

Jimmy spun round. The girl's arrival made Slappy instantly go limp. He lay sprawled on his back on the floor, staring up at the ceiling blankly.

"How do you do that?" the girl asked.

Jimmy rubbed his aching throat. He wondered if she could see any bruises from Slappy's wooden fingers.

He cleared his throat. "I . . . uh. . . "

A high, shrill voice from the corridor interrupted him. "Well, let *me* see too, Georgia!"

Another girl — a shorter girl with bright red curly hair tumbling down from a floppy, purple hat, and a face full of orange freckles — shoved the first girl into the room. "Stop hogging the view, Fatso!" she squeaked.

"Don't shove me!" the first girl snapped.

The red-haired girl shoved her again. "Move over!"

The taller girl bit her bottom lip. "I'm sorry, Mr O'James. My sister is a beast."

"And what are *you*?" the sister demanded. She tugged the purple hat down lower on her head, nearly covering her eyes. "You're a beast too. And you're ugly!"

Sprawled on his back on the floor, Slappy uttered an impatient growl.

"Can I help you two?" Jimmy asked, rubbing his sore neck. "How did you get back here?"

The dark-haired girl blushed. "I'm really sorry. My name is Georgia Boonshoft. I missed the show. My mum got the time wrong and —"

"Well, tell him *my* name, hog!" the sister interrupted nastily. "You think you're such hot stuff? You think you can just pretend I'm not here?"

"I *wish*," Georgia muttered.

She rolled her eyes. "This is my sister, Stella," she told Jimmy. She turned back to her sister and whispered through gritted teeth, "Now will you be quiet?"

"Make me!" Stella shot back nastily.

"Stella and I argue a lot," Georgia said, still blushing.

"Du-uh," Stella muttered.

"I'm really sorry to bother you, Mr O'James," Georgia said softly.

"Then go away!" Slappy exclaimed nastily from down on the floor.

Georgia laughed. "How did you *do* that? It really sounds as if the voice is coming from the dummy."

"Years of practice," Jimmy told her. He gave Slappy a kick in the side.

"Can we go now?" Stella demanded, impatiently tugging her sister's arm.

Georgia pulled free. "We missed the show," she repeated to Jimmy. "So Mum got the theatre manager to let us come backstage. I hope you

don't mind. I just wanted to meet Slappy."

"Can we go?" Stella whined again in her high, scratchy voice.

Georgia continued to ignore her. "You see, Mr O'James, I've been interested in puppets and dummies my whole life. I make my own puppets, and I put on shows."

"So lame," Stella cut in, rolling her eyes under the purple hat. "Everything about you is lame."

Georgia flashed her sister an angry look. "Can I shake Slappy's hand? Can you make him talk for me?" she asked Jimmy. "I love dummies."

"That's because you *are* one!" Stella declared, and burst out laughing.

"Who's working *your* mouth?" Slappy called to Stella from the floor.

"Excuse me?" Stella shot back.

"Were you born with that purple toadstool growing out of your head — or is that just a really disgusting skin rash?" Slappy asked Stella.

"That's amazing, Mr O'James!" Georgia exclaimed. "You never move your lips!"

"He only moves his lips when he reads!" Slappy declared with a high, evil giggle.

"That's enough, Slappy!" Jimmy said sharply. He narrowed his eyes at Georgia. "You really like puppets and dummies?"

She nodded. "I'd love to show you my puppets sometime."

Jimmy swept his hand back over his short brown hair. His expression was thoughtful.

"Wait outside for a minute or two," he told Georgia. "I may have a surprise for you."

"A surprise?" she cried. "What is it?"



Jimmy waited until the girls were out in the corridor. He closed the door behind them, then moved quickly.

He pressed his shoe down on Slappy's chest to keep the dummy from jumping up.

Slappy's eyes flashed angrily. "I'll give those girls a surprise they won't forget!" he rasped. "Let me up!"

Slappy thrashed his arms and legs wildly, desperate to free himself.

"Sorry, Slappy," Jimmy replied, keeping all his weight on Slappy's chest. "Let's finish what we started before they arrived."

Slappy laughed. "You mean the part where I was tearing your head off?"

"No. The part where I was putting you to sleep for ever," the ventriloquist replied softly.

He slid his foot off Slappy, bent down, grabbed the dummy round the waist, and lifted him off the floor.

Then he strode across the room. He picked up the other dummy's head from beside the dressing-table and carefully slid it back on to its shoulders.

Jimmy dropped Slappy to the floor. Then he raised the stack of yellowed pages to his face. And began chanting some strange words on the page:

*"Kalla Meeha Arumah..."*

"Hey, wait!" Slappy groaned. "I feel weird. Kind of faint."

*"... Kalumah nobah... reemuh..."*

The other dummy stirred. It sat up in its case and blinked its eyes.

Slappy slumped weakly against the wall. "I'm fading... Everything is fading..." he moaned.

"You are going to sleep for ever," Jimmy told him. "Your evil will sleep with you."

*"... Maru... Odoni... Mallah..."*

Slappy gazed groggily up at Jimmy. "Truce!" he called. "Hey — truce!"

Jimmy lowered the pages. He squinted down at Slappy. "Truce?"

"Please..." Slappy groaned weakly. "Please — don't do this to me. Let's have a truce."

A sneer curled Jimmy's lips. "You tried to pull my head off."

"I can't help myself," Slappy replied in a weak whisper. "Give me another chance, Jimmy.

# 9

Jimmy didn't answer the question. Instead, he picked up the yellowed stack of pages and read a long section softly to himself.

"What do I have to do?" Slappy whined. "Tell me!"

Jimmy finished reading, then slowly set the pages down. "I've just put a curse on you, Slappy," he announced.

Normally, Slappy would crack a joke when Jimmy said something like that. But now he gazed weakly at the ventriloquist. "A... curse?"

Jimmy nodded. "You have done too much evil, Slappy. You have hurt too many people. Ruined too many lives, including mine. You asked for one more chance. Here it is. The only way you can stay alive is to do *good*."

The dummy blinked and shook his head. "Do good? That's the curse?"

Jimmy lowered his gaze to the yellowed stack

of pages. "According to the curse, you have one week to do *three* good deeds."

Slappy groaned. "Good deeds?" he murmured weakly.

"You have to do three good deeds — and *no* evil," Jimmy continued. "If you don't do the three good deeds in a week, you will fall asleep and never come to life again."

"Please —" Slappy begged, grabbing Jimmy's sleeve. "I can't! Anything but that! Do good deeds? This is a nightmare. This is my worst nightmare!"

The ventriloquist didn't reply.

"Think of something else," Slappy pleaded. "Please — I'm begging you, Jimmy."

"Too late," Jimmy replied coldly. "I've read the words of the curse. You have no choice — if you want to stay alive." He picked up the pages. "If you'd like me to put you to sleep right now. . ."

"No!" the dummy shrieked. "Okay. Okay. I'll do it."

"I'm going to be watching you," Jimmy warned. "I'm going to watch your every move. One slip — and you're going on the log pile. You're history."

The dummy uttered a weak cry. "Three good deeds," he muttered, blinking his eyes rapidly. "Three good deeds. . ."

Jimmy turned to the door. "Georgia — you

can come in now," he called. "I have a surprise for you."

Slappy went limp as Georgia stepped back into the dressing-room, followed by her sister. "Yes?" she asked shyly, brushing her dark hair off her forehead.

"I've found a new Slappy dummy," Jimmy told Georgia, showing her the dummy in the crate. "So I don't need the old one any more."

"Really?" Georgia replied. Jimmy could see the growing excitement in her face.

"Since you like puppets and dummies so much, I'm going to give the old Slappy to you," Jimmy announced. He picked up the dummy and placed it in Georgia's arms.

"Wow! I don't believe it!" she exclaimed happily.

"What do I get?" Stella demanded angrily. "How come Georgia always gets whatever she wants, and I never get anything?"

She turned to Georgia. "That dummy is so ugly. Mum probably won't let it in the house!"

"I think he's beautiful," Georgia replied, cradling Slappy in her arms. "Thank you, Mr O'James. I'll take really good care of him. I promise."

"Do you have one for me?" Stella demanded, tugging at the sides of her purple cap. "It's my birthday in a couple of months."

"Stop it, Stella," Georgia whispered through

gritted teeth. "You know you're not interested in dummies. For once in your life, stop acting jealous all the time."

"You're stupid," Stella replied with a sneer. She crossed her arms tightly over her chest and stuck out her tongue at Slappy. "You're stupid too."

Georgia thanked Jimmy several more times. Then she turned and ran out of the door, hurrying to show her mother her prize. Jimmy could hear Stella complaining and whining all the way down the back corridor.

For a long while, he sat staring at the empty doorway. His thoughts were troubled.

I'm happy to be rid of Slappy, he told himself.

But will Slappy really change? Will he do the three good deeds?

Was it right to give him to Georgia?

Or have I done something really horrible here today?

# 10

Georgia pushed a stack of magazines aside and sat on the edge of her bed. She balanced Slappy on her knee.

She worked her hand through the hole in the back of his sports jacket. Her fingers fumbled for the controls to his eyes and mouth.

"Tell me, Slappy," she said, turning the dummy's head towards her, "do you hear all the noise? What's all that barking and howling outside?"

"It's raining cats and dogs!" she made Slappy say in a high Mickey Mouse voice. The dummy's wooden jaws clicked loudly as Georgia pulled the controls.

"Ha ha," Stella groaned from the other side of the bedroom. "That's so funny, I forgot to laugh."

"Shut up, Stella," Georgia snapped.

"You're pitiful," Stella sneered.

"Go away!" Georgia cried angrily. "If you

don't want to hear me practise with Slappy, why are you in here? Why do you have to fingerpaint on my desk? Why can't you fingerpaint in your own room?"

Stella leaned over the desk, rubbing her bright blue paint-covered hands across the paper in front of her. "My room is very neat," she replied. "Your room is a total mess. I fingerpaint in your room because no one will ever notice if I smear paint around."

Georgia sighed. "I'm going to clean my room this weekend. I know it's a mess."

"Mum said she's buying me my own dummy," Stella said, pouring yellow paint on to the paper and smearing it over the blue with both hands. "No. She said she's buying me *two* dummies. Brand-new ones. Not disgusting used ones."

"Stella, you're such a total liar," Georgia muttered, shaking her head. "You've really got to stop making up stories all the time."

"I don't make up stories!" Stella protested.

"Mum is really worried about you," Georgia continued. "Telling lies is such a sick thing."

"You're sick!" Stella shot back.

Georgia turned to Slappy on her lap. "Do you know another word for *liar*?" she asked him.

"Stella?" she made Slappy reply.

Stella opened her mouth to say something. But their mother burst into the room.

Mrs Boonshoft stumbled over Georgia's ruck-

sack on the floor. She grabbed a bookshelf to keep from falling. Several books, a box of computer disks, a rolled-up poster and a stuffed panda toppled from the shelf and landed in a pile of dirty clothes.

"Georgia — what are you doing now?" her mother demanded sharply.

"Practising with Slappy."

"But you promised you'd clean up this pigsty!" Mrs Boonshoft cried, kicking at the tangled pile of jeans and T-shirts.

"She can't. She's a pig," Stella chimed in.

"You keep out of it," Mrs Boonshoft snapped. "What are you doing in here, Stella? You've got blue fingerpaint all over Georgia's desk."

"Who cares?" Stella replied. She kept swirling her hands in the thick, gooey paint. "Georgia never uses her desk. She has to study on the floor because there's too much stuff piled on the desk."

"Mum — look. I've figured out how to make Slappy's eyes move," Georgia interrupted. She made the dummy's eyes slide from side to side.

Mrs Boonshoft sighed. "I'm really out of patience with you, Georgia. Please. I'm begging you. Put that ugly thing away."

Georgia hugged Slappy. "Don't call him ugly. You'll hurt his feelings, Mum."

"Sick," Stella muttered, keeping her eyes glued to her fingerpainting.

"Keep out of it," Mrs Boonshoft repeated sharply. She stepped over the dirty clothing and several books and CD cases to get to Georgia's bed. "You know I don't like to nag, Georgia. But you've promised me a hundred times you'd clean up this room. Haven't you? *Haven't you?*"

Georgia fiddled with Slappy's bow-tie. "Well..."

"After dinner, you said you'd come up here and clean up," her mother continued. "And now I find you sitting surrounded by junk, playing with that puppet."

"It's not a puppet," Georgia insisted. "I've just got him, Mum. I want to practise. You know. Work up a comedy act that I can perform at school."

"Work on your room instead," Mrs Boonshoft replied. "I mean it this time, Georgia. You want to go to Alison's birthday party tomorrow night — right?"

"Of course!" Georgia exclaimed.

"Well, unless this room is entirely clean and neat by tomorrow, you can't go."

Georgia opened her mouth to protest.

Mrs Boonshoft raised a hand to signal for silence. "Not another word. If the room isn't clean — you'll stay at home."

She made her way carefully back to the door. Then she turned to Stella. "You — out. Right

now. Georgia can't clean up with you in here making it even messier."

"Fine," Stella groaned. "No problem." She jumped up from the desk and marched out of the room, holding her paint-dripping hands out in front of her.

"Stella — stop! You have to clean up your paints!" Georgia cried. "You can't just leave them all there!"

Stella giggled and vanished out of the door.

Georgia uttered an angry cry. She set Slappy down carefully against the headboard of her bed. Then she stood up and gazed at the mess.

"This will take all night," she muttered unhappily. "Where do I start?"

Her eyes moved from the pile of dirty clothes to the stacks of books and magazines, to the blue and yellow fingerpaint dripping wetly down the side of her desk.

"Keep it together, Georgia," she instructed herself, tearing at the sides of her brown hair. "Don't lose it. Keep it together. You can do this."

She cleaned for a while. She picked up a few things from the floor.

But it was so boring.

Yawning, she returned Slappy to her lap and tried out a different, deeper voice for him. No. The new voice made her cough.

"I'm going to bed," she told the dummy

sleepily. She set him down on the floor. "I know, I know. I haven't finished cleaning up. I haven't really started. But I can do it in the morning."

A few minutes later, Georgia called good-night to her mother, turned off the light and climbed into bed.

Down on the floor, Slappy listened to Georgia's breathing. When it became soft and slow, he figured she was asleep.

He sat up straight. He stretched his arms over his head. He climbed eagerly to his feet.

"Look out, everyone," he whispered. "Here comes Slappy..."



Moonlight flooded through the bedroom window, sending pale white light over the cluttered room. Slappy shuffled silently into the light.

He stretched again. And bent his legs, testing them.

He had had to play dead for so long, sitting limp and lifeless. His whole body ached to move.

He turned and gazed at Georgia, sleeping soundly now on her side, dark hair falling over her forehead, one arm stretched above the bedspread.

Can I do this? Slappy wondered.

Can I really do a good deed?

The disgusting thought made his whole body shudder.

Thank goodness, I only have to do three good deeds, he thought bitterly. When they are done, the curse will be lifted. And I can figure out how to take my revenge on that idiot Jimmy O'James.

He sighed. "Oh, well . . . might as well get started."

Moving silently, he began cleaning up Georgia's room. He picked up magazines and stacked them neatly on a shelf. He found a laundry bag in the wardrobe and carefully stuffed the dirty clothes into it.

I can't believe I'm doing this, he moaned to himself. Is this really me? Slappy? Bending and stooping? Cleaning someone's bedroom?

He worked for hours. He arranged Georgia's collection of stuffed bears neatly in their cabinet. He gathered up all the sweet wrappers, soft drink cans and empty crisp packets, and folded them carefully into the waste-paper basket. He swept up crumbs and dust balls and paper scraps.

He carefully closed up the fingerpaints and wiped the spilled paint off the desk with a damp sponge.

When he'd finally finished cleaning and straightening, the moon was sinking. A red morning sun was starting to rise.

Slappy took one last look at the work he had done. Beautiful! Even in the dull, dawning light, the bedroom practically sparkled.

"One good deed down," he told himself, pressing a wooden hand over his mouth to stifle a weary yawn. "Only two to go."

Cleaning up was annoying work. Helping

someone was disgusting. It nearly made him sick.

But I won't be doing this for long, he told himself.

Unable to stop yawning, his arms and legs aching from tiredness, he sank back to his place on the floor beside Georgia's bed.

He rested his head against the bedspread and shut his eyes.

And fell into a deep sleep.

A few hours later, bright orange morning sunlight washed in through the window as Georgia woke up.

She sat up slowly, blinking herself awake.

Gazed round the room.

And opened her mouth in a bloodcurdling scream of horror.

# 12

"My room!" Georgia shrieked. "Noooooo! My room!"

Down on the floor, Slappy opened his eyes. What is her problem? he wondered.

She leaped out of bed, kicking him over on to his side without realizing it.

"My room! I don't believe it! Who *did* this?"

Her screams rang in Slappy's ears.

He pulled himself up enough to see — and a silent gasp escaped his throat as the room came into focus.

What a mess.

What a horrible mess.

The curtains had been shredded, Slappy saw. Shredded and clipped off at the ends. The wardrobe door stood open. All the clothing had been pulled out and tossed across the room.

A purple stain spread over the carpet like a dark puddle. The stuffed bears were kicked under the bed. Books and magazines, open and

torn, were strewn over the floor, over the foot of the bed.

The walls — the walls —

They were smeared with blue and yellow fingerpaint.

"Fingerpaint!" Georgia shrieked as if reading Slappy's mind.

"Fingerpaint!" And then a hoarse cry burst from her throat. "Stella! Stella — how *could* you?"

The floor shook as Georgia thudded out of the room and hurtled across the hall to her sister's room. "Stella — how *could* you? Stella!"

Slappy shook himself hard, as if trying to shake away a bad dream. He shut his eyes, then opened them slowly.

The room didn't change. Stained and cluttered and torn and trashed.

"All my hard work wasted!" Slappy sighed.

He pulled himself to his feet. "That bratty little sissster," he hissed furiously, shaking his wooden fists. "That bratty little . . . brat!"

She had ruined all his hard work.

Ruined his good deed.

"Now I'm back to a big fat zero," he muttered, cursing and pounding the side of the bed. "Now I have to start all over again."

He crept to the bedroom door. "Maybe I'll turn Stella's head round so that she's permanently facing the wrong way!"

She'll be sorry, Slappy thought bitterly.  
She'll be sorry she ever messed with me.

He shuffled across the hall and stopped beside Stella's room. He could see Georgia swinging her fists in the air, screaming at her sister, her eyes wild, her face bright red.

Stella sat up in her bed, hands raised as if shielding herself from Georgia. Stella's purple cap was draped over a bedpost. Her red hair stuck out wildly round her pale face.

"I didn't do it!" Stella wailed. "Shut up and listen to me! I didn't do it!"

"Liar!" Georgia screamed furiously. "Liar!  
Liar! *Of course* you did it!"

Pressed against the door frame, Slappy watched them scream at each other.

A sound made him turn and gaze down the hall.

"Oh!" He uttered a gasp when he saw Mrs Boonshoft storming towards Stella's room.

She can see me standing here! I've been caught!

Now what?

# 13

Slappy went limp. Slumped to the floor, his legs folding beneath his body.

"What on earth?" Mrs Boonshoft screamed, swinging her fists at her sides as she strode down the hall.

She let out a startled cry as she tripped over Slappy.

"Hey!" She picked up the dummy and tossed him out of the way. Then she burst into Stella's room. "Break it up! Break it up — both of you! Not another word!"

It took her a long time to get both girls to calm down.

"Look at my room! Look at it!" Georgia wailed. She grabbed her mother with both hands and pulled her across the hall to the doorway of her room.

"How did he get over here?" she wondered out loud, stepping over Slappy.

Mrs Boonshoft gasped and raised a hand to her forehead when she saw the horror of Georgia's room.

"It wasn't me! It wasn't me!" Stella chanted. Tears rolled down her face on to the front of her pyjamas.

"I . . . don't . . . believe . . . this," Mrs Boonshoft murmured weakly, saying each word slowly and distinctly.

"It wasn't me!" Stella shrieked. "Why would I do this? Why?"

"Because you're jealous of me all the time!" Georgia shot back.

"Huh?" Stella gasped.

"It's true!" Georgia insisted, still red-faced. "You're jealous because I have the bigger room, and because I have puppets and things, and because I get better grades, and I'm taller, and because I'm older, and because — because —"

"Not true! You're *the liar!*" Stella screamed. "You messed up your own room to get me in trouble!" And she threw herself at her sister, pulling her out into the hall, growling and sobbing.

"Stop it! Stop it!" Mrs Boonshoft hurried to pull them apart. "You're both going to clean Georgia's room," she declared. "I don't care if it takes a week."

She turned to Georgia. "And you'd better call your friend Alison. You will not be going to her

birthday party today. You'll be at home cleaning."

"But — but —" Georgia sputtered. "That's so *unfair!*"

Georgia stormed past her mother into her room and slammed the door behind her. Mrs Boonshoft hurried after her.

Stella stumbled back to her room and dropped on to the edge of her bed, breathing hard, her entire body trembling. Slappy watched her muttering angrily to herself, shaking her head, her red hair falling wetly over her face.

I only have a week to do my good deeds, the dummy thought angrily. I can't have her ruining them for me.

I have no choice. I have to let her know who is boss round here.

Slappy picked himself up off the floor. He straightened his sports jacket and shuffled quickly into Stella's room.

Her eyes bulged in shock when she saw him walking up to her.

But Slappy didn't give her a chance to cry out.

He shoved his wooden hand hard against her mouth and brought his face close to hers.

"Hey, Stella —" he rasped. "The next time you ruin my good deed, I'm going to stick my hand so far down your throat, you'll have splinters in your stomach!"

Stella's eyes bulged even wider.

She jerked her head away from Slappy's hand. And let out a terrified scream.

Slappy turned as Mrs Boonshoft burst back into the room. He instantly went limp, sinking on to Stella's bedspread.

"Stella —" her mum cried. "What's going on? What are you doing with Georgia's dummy?"

"It — it — talked!" Stella choked out.

Mrs Boonshoft frowned. "Really —"

"Yes! It talked!" Stella insisted. "Mum, listen to me! The dummy. It — it walked in here and it talked all by itself!"

Mrs Boonshoft stomped across the room. She grabbed Slappy in both hands, turned him round, and stared angrily into his eyes.

This time I've had it, Slappy realized.

I'll never get my good deeds done. I'm going to sleep for ever.

This time . . . I'm doomed.

But I'm not going down alone. If I'm going to die, they are going to die first — all three of them!

# 14

Slappy gazed blankly up at Mrs Boonshoft.

She held him close for a moment, staring back at him. Then she turned to Stella.

"Stella, this lying has got to stop," she said softly.

"But Mum —" Stella tried to protest.

"Talking dummies?" Mrs Boonshoft cried, swinging Slappy under her arm. "Talking dummies? Do you really expect any intelligent person to believe that?"

Stella opened her mouth, but no sound came out of it.

"I'm so worried about you, Stella," her mother continued, her voice breaking with emotion. "I've warned you a million times to stop making up stories. You were lying about Georgia's room too — weren't you?"

"No —" Stella gasped. "No, Mum. Really."

Mrs Boonshoft narrowed her eyes at her daughter. "Denying it won't help," she said

sternly. "It's one story after another with you."

"You've got to believe me!" Stella cried, glaring furiously at Slappy.

Her mother sighed. "Get cleaned up, Stella. Get dressed. Help your sister put her room back together. Then you and I are going to have a long talk."

Before Stella could protest again, Mrs Boonshoft spun out of the room, carrying Slappy under her arm. She brought him into Georgia's room and tossed him on to the bed.

"Where did you find Slappy?" Georgia asked. She was down on her knees on the floor, trying to clean up the dark stain from her carpet.

"Stella claims he walked into her room and talked to her." Mrs Boonshoft sighed.

Georgia dropped her sponge and laughed. "She's sick."

Her mother bit her bottom lip. "It isn't funny, Georgia. It isn't funny at all."

The next morning, Georgia brought Slappy down to breakfast. After getting her room back together, she'd spent hours practising with him. She thought maybe her mother would like to see some of the comedy act she was working on.

But Mrs Boonshoft had an appointment in town and was eager to get out of the house.

Georgia plopped down at the breakfast table and placed Slappy on the chair beside her. "I

can't believe I missed Alison's party," she moaned.

"I'm sorry," her mother replied, pouring herself a mug of coffee. "But we have to have rules round here. We can't have arguing, and screaming, and wrestling matches. It's just the three of us now since your father died."

"I — I know," Georgia stammered.

"So we have to stick together. We have to live peacefully with one another. What happened yesterday was a total disgrace."

"Yes, I know," Georgia repeated softly. "But it wasn't my fault."

Mrs Boonshoft took a long sip from the white mug, keeping her eyes on Georgia. "I thought of something nice you can do today to get back on my good side," she announced. "Something you can do with that dummy."

Georgia's face brightened. "Really? Like what?"

"I was talking to Mrs Kramer last night. You know her daughter Maggie — right?"

Georgia nodded, chewing a mouthful of toast. "Yeah. Maggie broke her leg."

"Not exactly," her mother replied. "She's in a wheelchair. Poor thing. It was a really serious hip fracture."

Georgia swallowed the toast and reached for the orange juice pitcher. "So what do you want me to do?"

Mrs Boonshoft set down her coffee mug and leaned across the table. "I think it would be nice if you took Slappy over to Maggie's house and put on a little show for her. She's very lonely and depressed. It would really cheer her up."

A smile spread over Georgia's face. "That's a great idea, Mum. I'll do it!" She turned to Slappy. "We can try out our new act — right, Slappy?"

"Right!" she made Slappy reply in the high Mickey Mouse voice.

It is a great idea! Slappy thought. Better than they know.

Maybe I won't have to kill them after all.

Putting on this show will be my good deed. And *this* time, nothing is going to ruin it.

"Good morning!" Stella stepped into the kitchen, dressed in white shorts and a bright magenta tank top. She already had her purple cap pulled down over her head.

"I'm going too!" she announced.

# 15

The Kramers lived in a large white stone house with white columns in front, on top of a steeply sloping front lawn. Flower gardens stretched along the house on both sides of the columns. The grass down the hill to the street was smooth and clipped short, dotted with well-trimmed evergreen shrubs and tall, graceful trees.

It was such a beautiful, sunny day, Georgia decided to hold the ventriloquist show on the front lawn. She wheeled Maggie out in front of the flowers. Then she carried a folding chair for herself from the big garage at the back.

Maggie was eleven years old. She was a short, wiry girl, with wavy blonde hair, bright green eyes and a dazzling smile. She hadn't been smiling much lately. She was athletic and very energetic, the kind of person who never liked to sit still.

Ever since she'd broken her hip waterskiing

on a holiday with her parents, she'd felt trapped. Trapped in the wheelchair.

Georgia hoped that spending some time with Maggie would cheer her up just a little. Squinting into the sun, Georgia sat down on the folding chair and propped Slappy on her lap.

"I'm not very good yet," she confessed to Maggie. "I've just got Slappy, and I haven't really had time to rehearse any kind of act with him."

Georgia waited for Stella to make a sarcastic comment. But Stella had promised to be on her best behaviour.

She didn't make her usual nasty remarks. She sat cross-legged in the shade of a tall evergreen tree, her face hidden by the floppy purple hat, absently pulling up blades of grass with both hands.

Georgia fumbled her hand inside the dummy's back till she found the controls for his mouth and eyes. She opened and closed the mouth several times, testing it out.

"I'm kind of nervous," she told Maggie. She cleared her throat.

"Why be nervous?" Maggie asked, fidgeting in the wheelchair. "It's just me. And you know I laugh at anything."

"Thanks for the encouragement! I need it," Georgia declared. She turned to Slappy. "How are you today, Slappy?"

"We-beep. We-beep," she made Slappy reply.

"What does *that* mean?" Georgia asked.

"It means I have a frog in my throat!" Slappy replied.

It was a stupid joke, but Maggie laughed.

"Are you feeling sick today?" Georgia asked the dummy.

She made his mouth click up and down. "No. But my head hurts!"

"You have a headache, Slappy?"

"No — splinters!"

Maggie laughed and slapped the arms of the wheelchair with both hands. "Georgia, you're good!" she exclaimed. "I can barely see your mouth move."

"Ha ha," Stella chimed in sarcastically from down on the grass. "Remind me to laugh."

"Stella — you promised!" Georgia scolded.

"Oops. Sorry," her little sister murmured.

"Do some more," Maggie urged. "I love Slappy's squeaky voice. It's very funny."

"You're funny too!" Georgia made Slappy say to Maggie. "Funny-looking!"

"Now, don't get insulting, Slappy," Georgia scolded him. "Didn't your mother teach you any manners?"

"How could she?" Slappy replied. "She was an oak tree!"

Maggie tossed back her head and laughed. "Georgia, this was so nice of you!" she declared.

Yes — and nice of *me!* Slappy thought happily.

Here I am, entertaining a girl with a broken hip.

What a good deed. And all I have to do is keep my mouth shut and act like a dummy.

Good Deed Number One for Slappy!

I'm still alive! Still alive!

"Slappy, do you know how to stop a wild elephant from charging?" Georgia asked.

"Take away his credit card?" she made Slappy reply in his squeaky mouse voice.

"I've heard that one!" Maggie declared. "But it's still funny."

Georgia turned back to Slappy. But a shout from the house made her stop.

"Georgia — telephone call for you!" Maggie's mum called from the front door.

Georgia jumped up. "I'll be right back," she told Maggie. She set Slappy down on his back on the grass. Then she went jogging to the house.

It's probably Mum with some kind of a message, Georgia thought.

She was nearly to the front door when she heard the scream.

A high wail of horror.

*"Help me! Somebody! AAAIIIIII!"*

Georgia's heart leaped into her throat.

She spun round.

And saw the wheelchair — rolling down the hill.

Bumping hard over the grass. Picking up speed.

Maggie's arms flew up helplessly. Grabbed at nothing but air.

Faster. Faster.

The wheelchair rocketing down the steep hill, down to the street.

Maggie's terrified cry rang in Georgia's ears.  
*"Help me! Stop this! Somebody!"*

Georgia saw Stella — on her feet now — standing so stiffly, frozen in terror.

With Maggie's cries in her ears, Georgia took a few lurching steps down the lawn.

She heard the shrill squeal of car tyres before she saw the blue van roar on to the street.

"Nooooo!" Georgia let out a helpless cry as the wheelchair bounced on its collision course with the speeding van.

Did the van hit Maggie's chair?

Georgia's eyes blurred from her terror.

But now she saw Maggie fly up from the chair. Fly on to the tarmac.

Maggie's screams stopped.

Such a heavy, heavy silence now.

Maggie didn't move.

# 16

“Maggie? Maggie?”

Georgia called her name all the way down to the street.

The blue van skidded to a stop. The driver, a young man with long hair falling from under a bright red WISCONSIN cap, came running out. “Is she okay? Is she?” he called.

Georgia reached Maggie first. She dropped down on to the street beside her. Stella and the van driver stood above them.

“Maggie?” Georgia called. “Can you hear me?”

“I didn’t hit her,” the young man said breathlessly. “I swerved. I saw her fly out of the chair when it bumped over the kerb. But I didn’t hit her.”

“Owww,” Maggie groaned and gazed up at Georgia. “My arm.” She shut her eyes.

“Your arm?” Georgia repeated.

“It’s killing me,” Maggie replied, keeping her

eyes closed. "I landed on it. I heard it crack. I think I've broken it."

"Does anything else hurt?" Georgia demanded.

Maggie opened her eyes. "No. I don't think so." She groaned in pain again. "Just my arm."

"You're lucky," the young man said.

Maggie uttered a cry. "Lucky? Now I've got a broken hip *and* a broken arm!"

The ambulance came a few minutes later. Mrs Kramer rode off with Maggie to the hospital.

Georgia picked Slappy up off the grass and began walking home with Stella. In all the fright and excitement, she hadn't had a chance to talk to her sister.

"What happened?" she asked Stella, sliding Slappy over her shoulder. "You were the only one with Maggie. How did the wheelchair get loose?"

Stella swallowed hard. She lowered her head, hiding her face under the floppy hat.

"Come on, Stella. Answer me," Georgia insisted, grabbing her sister's shoulder.

"You — you're not going to believe me," Stella stammered, still avoiding Georgia's eyes.

Georgia stopped walking and spun Stella until she faced her. "Tell me. Tell me the truth."

Stella hesitated. "The dummy did it," she said finally. "The dummy pushed her."

"Stop it! Stop it!" Georgia cried, shaking her sister by the shoulders. "Stop making up stupid stories. What really happened? You didn't push Maggie — did you?"

"Huh? Of course not," Stella gasped. And then she began to sob, racking sobs that made her shoulders tremble. "The dummy pushed her, Georgia. You've got to believe me. I — I wasn't really watching. I was looking at a squirrel up in the tree."

"And?" Georgia demanded, holding on to Stella's shoulders. "And — then what? What did you see?"

"I heard Maggie scream," Stella replied, tears rolling down her cheeks. "I turned and saw Slappy. He was standing behind the wheelchair. And the wheelchair — it was moving. Rolling down the hill."

Georgia rolled her eyes. "Then what did Slappy do?" she asked.

"I — I'm not sure," Stella said. "I was so scared. I didn't watch him. I was watching Maggie. I guess Slappy dropped back onto the grass. He pushed her. Then he dropped back where you left him."

"But that's *crazy*!" Georgia cried. She lifted the lifeless dummy from her shoulder and held it out to her sister. "Look at him, Stella. Take a good, hard look at Slappy."

Stella pulled back with a shudder. "I don't

want to. I mean — I've already looked at him, Georgia."

"Look at him," Georgia insisted. "He's just a dummy, right? He's made of wood, right? He's just a suit of clothes with a head and shoes, right? Right?"

"I'm not crazy!" Stella screamed. "I'm not!"

Yes, you are! Slappy thought bitterly.

Stella really is a liar, Slappy realized.

She's sick. I didn't touch that wheelchair.

I was lying flat on my back in the grass. I never moved.

I never even saw what was happening.

Stella is a liar, Slappy decided. A dangerous liar.

She's ruined both of my good deeds. Both of them. I'm back to zero, thanks to her.

And time is running out.

Well . . . I'm afraid time is running out for Stella.

I don't know why she's trying so hard to ruin Georgia's life.

But I can't let her destroy mine.

Stella is dead meat.

Tonight's the night.

# 17

That night after dinner, Georgia had her science project spread over the dining-room table. She kept peering into her container of snails, making observations as she filled out charts and made careful drawings.

Slappy sat propped in a dining-room chair opposite her. He stared blankly ahead at the snails. But he wasn't paying any attention to them.

He was listening to the conversation Georgia's mum was having on the phone in the next room. She had been talking for nearly half an hour to her sister, talking about Stella.

"It's reached the point where I don't know what to do," Mrs Boonshoft was saying. "Stella has always been difficult. But she's certainly never been violent before."

Georgia's mum was pacing back and forth tensely in the living room, the phone pressed against her ear. Slappy could see her worried

expression every time she passed the dining-room doorway.

"I know, I know," she said, sighing. "Telling lies and making up wild stories is one thing. I can deal with that. But, Lilah, I honestly think Stella pushed that poor girl in the wheelchair down the hill."

Mrs Boonshoft paced rapidly, tugging nervously at her dark hair with her free hand. "I don't know why Stella is jealous of Georgia," she continued, her voice trembling with emotion. "I don't understand it, Lilah. But it's out of control. Stella is completely out of control."

"I know. Yes, I know. I talked with Stella all afternoon. I tried to get through to her. But she kept insisting that Georgia's new ventriloquist dummy pushed Maggie. Can you imagine it?"

"Stella keeps talking about that dummy. She keeps blaming it for the awful things she is doing. I don't know. Maybe I should. Maybe I should take her to a doctor..."

No need for that, Slappy thought, staring blankly at the snail container. You don't have to bother taking her to a doctor.

I'm going to take care of the Stella problem tonight.

Later, Georgia cleaned up in the dining room. Then she called good-night to her mother and carried Slappy upstairs to her room.

Slappy glimpsed Stella's room across the hall. The lights were out. The door was open.

Good, he thought. Stella's left the door open for me. That will make it easier.

Of course, everyone will be sad when they find Stella in the morning.

Georgia will turn to me to cheer her up. And that will count as a good deed.

"Sorry I didn't pay any attention to you tonight, Slappy." Georgia lifted the dummy up in front of her.

"That's okay," she made him reply.

"Well, have a good sleep." She chuckled. "Sleep tight. Don't let the termites bite."

She started to raise him on to a high bookshelf.

No — *wait!* Slappy thought frantically. Put me down. Put me down on the floor where you left me last night!

She plopped him on to the high shelf and slid him against the wall.

Why is she doing this? Slappy asked himself, staring blankly down at her. Doesn't she know she is making it harder for me to get across the hall to her sister's room?

Slappy sighed. I can't catch a break here.

Bad enough I have to do three good deeds or I'm a dead man.

Why do they have to make it so hard?

A few minutes later, Georgia turned out the

lights and climbed into bed. Slappy waited until her breathing slowed and he knew she was asleep.

I have to climb down now, Slappy decided. Very carefully and quietly.

I have no choice. I have to do this.

I can't let Stella keep messing up my good deeds and then blaming me for the things she does.

He edged away from the wall. Slid himself to the front of the shelf.

He peered down.

It was a long way to the floor, he saw. But he could lower himself easily from shelf to shelf. Then the last drop wouldn't be too far.

Here goes, Slappy told himself.

He turned himself carefully to face the wall. Then, gripping the top shelf, he lowered himself silently over the side.

His big shoes dangled in the air for a moment, then found the next shelf. Slowly, he grabbed the next shelf down and began to lower himself again.

But this time his foot caught against something. Bumped something hard.

Books started to fall. *THUD THUD*. They crashed to the floor.

"No!" The cry escaped Slappy's mouth.

His hands slid off the shelf.

He fell.

Landed with a hard *THUD*.  
And another pile of books fell on top of him.  
Ow! A heavy dictionary or encyclopaedia  
landed on his head.  
Bright red lights flashed in his eyes.  
Groaning, he turned to the bed.  
Did the noise wake Georgia?  
Yes.  
To his horror, he watched her stir and raise  
her head.

# 18

"Stella?" she mumbled groggily. "Is that you?"

She waited a few seconds for an answer.

Slappy froze, still crumpled on the floor, surrounded by fallen books.

Georgia shut her eyes. Her head dropped softly back on to the pillow.

Slappy let out a sigh of relief. He didn't like close calls.

He pulled himself to his feet. Straightened his bow-tie. Pulled down the cuffs of his sports jacket.

One last glance at Georgia. She was sleeping soundly again, dark hair falling over her face.

Slappy tiptoed to the door. He looked up and down the hall. Then he crept into Stella's room.

He blinked at the heavy darkness. She had thick curtains drawn over the window, blocking out the moonlight.

Slappy stood in the doorway for a few moments, waiting for his eyes to adjust.

Then he shuffled slowly to the bed.  
To his surprise, the bedspread had fallen to  
the floor. He caught himself just before tripping  
over it.

Blinking in the darkness, he saw two pillows  
in the centre of the bed. The sheet and blanket  
rumpled.

No Stella?

She wasn't in bed.

A cough from across the room made him spin  
round.

A light flashed on.

"Huh?" Slappy had only time to gasp.

Then Stella, still dressed, still in jeans and a  
sweater, her purple cap pulled down over her  
red hair —

— Stella still dressed, her eyes wide with  
fury, her mouth set in a furious scowl —

— Stella carrying a long-handled axe be-  
tween both hands. The blade gleaming in the  
light from the ceiling, sparkling so brightly.

The axe blade dazzling Slappy for a moment.  
Freezing him in place, as if hypnotizing him.  
Stella came charging across the room.

With a roar of fury, she raised the axe high.

Slappy watched the blade float up like a  
glowing star.

And then Stella roared again as she swung  
the blade down.

"AAAAAIIIII!" Slappy opened his mouth in a

howl of pain as the first swing sliced through his shoe. Split his foot in two.

He tried to squirm away. But he couldn't move.

Beneath the cap, Stella's eyes bulged with fury as she raised the big axe again.

And brought it down on top of Slappy's head.

Over his scream, he heard the *CRACK*, the ugly sound of wood splitting.

The red lights flashed in front of him. Brighter, brighter.

The pain shot through his head, down his body.

I'm gone, Slappy realized.

I never stood a chance.

# 19

The flashing red lights grew brighter, then started to fade.

Slappy blinked, his head throbbing with pain. He stared up at inky blackness.

The blackness of death, he thought.

But to his surprise, his eyes focused on a window. Silvery moonlight washing across the floor.

With a groan, he pulled himself to a sitting position. He rubbed his head gently.

And saw the heavy book on the carpet beside him. And the other books strewn over the floor.

Blinking, he turned and saw Georgia, asleep on her bed, face buried in the pillow.

The book fell on my head, he realized. And it knocked me out.

The axe — Stella and the axe — I dreamed it. It was a nightmare.

*Of course I'm having horrifying nightmares*

about that girl. She's keeping me from doing my good deeds.

Only four days left. Four days to do three good deeds.

Or else I really will be in complete darkness — for ever.

The fact that he was only dreaming didn't cheer up Slappy.

He still had a job to do. A deadly job.

He shoved the heavy book aside and climbed unsteadily to his feet. He waited to gain his balance. Then he shuffled out of the room and across the hall, his big shoes sliding silently over the carpet.

He stepped into Stella's room. It smelled of sweet perfume. She had been sampling her mother's perfume spray bottles earlier.

He took two or three steps towards Stella's bed.

He didn't see the axe come down.

But he felt the sharp, splitting pain explode in his head.

Before the darkness swallowed him, Slappy knew that *this* time it was real.

# 20

He opened his eyes to the sound of three voices all screaming at once.

“Did you crack his head? I’m warning you, Stella — if you broke him...”

“Stella, why did you take Georgia’s dummy? Why did you do this? Please tell me —”

“He walked into my room! I swear it! I didn’t take him!”

Sprawled on his back on the carpet, Slappy gazed around. It took him a long while to focus, to realize that he was in Stella’s room.

Turning his head slowly, he saw a long, slender object beside him on the rug. An aluminum baseball bat.

Not an axe. Not an axe.

Stella had beaned him with a metal baseball bat.

And now Stella, Georgia and their mum stood in the middle of the room, shouting

at each other, gesturing wildly, arguing, all talking at once.

"You should have been asleep," Mrs Boonshoft told Stella. "Why were you awake?"

"I wasn't!" Stella wailed. "I'm telling the truth. I heard a crash in Georgia's room. It woke me up. I — I thought it was a burglar or something. I jumped out of bed and grabbed the baseball bat."

Stella stared down at Slappy. "Someone walked into my room," she continued shakily. "I thought it was a burglar. Really. I swung the bat and knocked him down. And — and it was the dummy!"

"Liar!" Georgia shrieked. "That is so totally stupid! Why can't you tell the truth, Stella?"

"I *am*!" Stella replied shrilly. Tears rolled down her bright red cheeks.

"Dummies don't walk," their mother murmured, shaking her head.

"Tell the truth. You sneaked into my room," Georgia accused her sister. "You pulled Slappy down from the high shelf. I deliberately put him up there so he'd be safe. But you —"

"Why won't anyone believe me?" Stella screamed, sobbing. "Why? Why?"

She dived forward and grabbed Slappy off the floor. She held him in both hands and began shaking him. "Why? Why? Why?"

"Let go of him!" Georgia cried. She grabbed Slappy's head and began to tug.

Stella tugged back. "He's evil!" she cried. "Can't you see it? He's evil!"

Screaming and crying, the two girls were using Slappy for a tug of war.

Mrs Boonshoft tossed her hands in the air. "You're both out of control," she moaned. She raised her eyes to the ceiling. "What am I supposed to do?"

Do *something*! Slappy thought angrily, being jerked back and forth between the two sisters. *I'm not enjoying this!*

Georgia and Stella went to school the next morning. Slappy found himself back on his perch on top of the bookshelf in Georgia's room.

He spent the day staring at the clock on the bedside table.

The time is wasting away, he thought bitterly. I have so little time left to do my good deeds.

Should he still get Stella out of the way? He couldn't decide. Killing her might take up too much time.

If only she would stay away from him and stop ruining every good deed he tried.

What was Stella's problem? he wondered. He'd never met such a sick kid.

Georgia didn't appear in her room until after

dinner. Then she came hurrying in and loaded her rucksack with books and notebooks. She slung the rucksack over her shoulders, then walked to the bookshelf and pulled Slappy down.

"Come on, Slappy. We're going babysitting."

Huh? Babysitting? Will I be able to do any good deeds there? Slappy wondered.

Georgia carried him out into the hall. Stella came rushing from her room. "Georgia — where are you going?" she demanded.

"None of your business," Georgia snapped coldly. She hugged Slappy to her as if shielding him from her sister.

"No. Come on," Stella insisted. "I just want to know where you're going."

"Why do you care?" Georgia replied, starting down the stairs.

"No reason. Really, Georgia, I just want to know," Stella insisted.

"Babysitting for Robby across the street," Georgia muttered.

Slappy bounced in her arms the rest of the way down. He raised his eyes to the top of the stairs and caught the thoughtful expression on Stella's face.

Why does she want to know where Georgia is babysitting? Slappy wondered. Why is it so important to her?

What is Stella planning?

# 21

Georgia opened the front door. A hard rain pounded the front doorstep. Thunder rumbled across the night sky. Rainwater splashed from a clogged gutter at the front of the house.

"We'll make a mad dash for it, Slappy," Georgia said, sheltering him under her yellow plastic rain poncho. "It's right across the street."

She took off running down the front lawn, her shoes squishing in the wet mud, kicking up waves of water. "What a storm!" she cried, as a roar of thunder seemed to shake the ground.

She jogged on to the front doorstep of the small brick house across the street and rang the bell. "Hurry, Mrs Warren. I'm totally drenched already!"

The door swung open. A pleasant-looking young woman, already in a raincoat and hat, greeted Georgia warmly. "Just drop the wet stuff in the closet there. Thanks for coming at

such short notice, Georgia. Robby has been looking forward to seeing you."

Georgia shrugged off the plastic poncho and shoved it into the hall closet. She shivered. She turned, adjusting Slappy's jacket.

"What's that? A new puppet?" Mrs Warren asked.

"I thought Robby might enjoy meeting Slappy," Georgia said, brushing drops of rain from Slappy's painted eyebrows.

Mrs Warren frowned. "Maybe. But you know Robby. He's so timid. He might be afraid."

"I'll be careful," Georgia promised.

Oh, wonderful! Slappy thought unhappily. We're babysitting a wimp. I thought maybe I could do a good deed by entertaining the kid. But if the little geek is afraid of me, I'm wasting my time here!

Time...

Slappy glanced at the clock on the mantel. Time was ticking by. Jimmy O'James's curse was never out of Slappy's thoughts.

Three good deeds to stay alive. But — how?

The Warrens hurried out, promising to come home early. Georgia carried Slappy into the den where two-year-old Robby was down on the floor, playing with a pile of superhero action figures.

"Hi, Robby. Look what I've brought," Georgia announced, raising Slappy in front of her.

Robby, chubby and pink-skinned, with a round baby face and soft, wavy brown hair, raised his eyes to Slappy. He wore a long-sleeved red shirt under blue OshKosh dungarees, and was barefoot because he'd kicked off his socks.

"What's that?" he asked, pointing at Slappy.

"I'll show you," Georgia replied. She sat Slappy down on the floor and slid her hand into his back to the controls.

"Hi, Robby!" she made Slappy say, clicking his mouth up and down. "My name is Slappy!"

Robby's expression changed. His chin trembled and his face reddened. "I don't like him!" he wailed. He banged an action figure down on the linoleum floor. "I don't like him!"

"No, wait," Georgia pleaded. "Slappy is funny, Robby. Slappy likes you."

"I like you, Robby," she made the dummy say. "You're a good boy!"

"Put him away!" the little boy screamed, his face darkening even deeper. "I don't like him! I don't like him! He's scary!"

"Okay," Georgia agreed reluctantly. She picked up Slappy. "But don't you want to touch him, Robby? You could play with him if you want."

"Noooooooo!" Robby screeched, pounding the action figure on the floor. "I... don't... like... him!"

"Okay, okay." Georgia carried Slappy out of

the den and dropped him on to a sofa in the living room. Then she hurried back to play with Robby.

Gazing at the mantelpiece clock, Slappy listened to them in the other room. Robby didn't want to play any of the games Georgia suggested. He didn't want to watch a cartoon video. He wanted a snack, but he didn't like anything Georgia offered him.

At eight o'clock, Georgia started trying to get Robby to go to bed. But he kept insisting he had to stay up until his parents returned.

What a whining little jerk, Slappy thought bitterly.

He could hear Georgia growing more and more impatient with the kid. "You're acting like this because you're sleepy," she told Robby. "Come on. Let me tuck you in, and I'll read you a funny story."

"I don't like stories!" Robby declared angrily.

What am I going to do? Slappy asked himself, sighing, watching the second hand on the clock ticking off the seconds.

I'm just lying here watching my life pass before my eyes. How could this be happening to me?

It was after nine-thirty when Georgia finally got Robby tucked in. She returned from his room sighing wearily.

She passed Slappy without glancing at him.

He could see her plop into a chair in the den.

He heard the TV go on. Georgia began flipping from channel to channel. Finally, she landed on one programme. Slappy listened to the drone of voices from the TV.

The clock seemed to tick louder. The sound thundered in Slappy's ears.

At a little after ten o'clock, he heard a high wail from down the hall. Robby. Crying.

Slappy watched the den doorway, expecting Georgia to come hurrying out. Expecting Georgia to go and see why the baby was crying.

The voices on the TV droned on.

Robby's wails grew louder, more frantic.

No sign of Georgia. She didn't move from her chair.

Robby's cries rose and fell like an ambulance siren.

Something is terribly wrong, Slappy decided. Why isn't Georgia doing anything?

He slid off the sofa and tiptoed to the den. She's asleep! he realized. Georgia had fallen asleep in the armchair, the TV remote control grasped tightly in her hand.

Robby's frantic cries rang in Slappy's ears.

Is this my chance? he wondered. My chance to do a good deed?

He spun away from the den and hurried down the hall to Robby's room.

What was going on in there?

# 22

Slappy stopped at the door to Robby's room and peered in.

The boy's screams were shrill and interrupted by coughs and choking sounds. His little hands flailed wildly behind the crib bars.

Slappy saw immediately what the problem was.

Robby's blanket had become tangled round his neck. The blanket was choking him!

Serves you right, you little freak!

That was Slappy's first thought.

His second thought was that he finally had a chance to do a good deed.

He shuffled quickly up to the crib, reached inside, and loosened the light wool baby blanket. Then he gently pulled the blanket out from under Robby.

The little boy stopped his howls. He snuffled a bit, then shut his eyes and began to drift back to sleep.

Slappy carefully covered him with the blanket. "You're okay now," he whispered soothingly. "You're a good boy. You're okay. Go back to sleep."

He whispered into the crib until Robby was sleeping soundly, comfortably. Then Slappy tiptoed out and returned to the sofa in the living room.

One down, two to go, Slappy thought, feeling pleased with himself.

That was an easy one.

I think I can do this. I think I can beat this stupid curse that ventriloquist put on me.

And when I do, Jimmy O'James had better watch out...

I'll track him down, and I really will pull off his head! It's the least I can do to pay him back for this nightmare he's putting me through.

Gazing at the ticking clock, Slappy drifted off to sleep.

He was startled awake a few minutes later by sounds and voices all around.

The front door swung open. Mr and Mrs Warren hurried in, shaking off rainwater, both talking at once.

The TV droned on in the den.

Slappy heard Georgia's voice. She had awakened and was talking to someone on the phone.

And over all of these sounds, Slappy heard a high wail.

Robby!

Robby screaming at the top of his lungs, crying and shrieking.

"What's happening?" Mrs Warren cried, tossing off her raincoat.

Georgia dropped the phone and came running into the living room. "He — he just started crying!" she stammered. "He was perfectly quiet. Really!"

Georgia and the Warrens went running down the hall to Robby's room.

"Robby — are you okay?" Mrs Warren called breathlessly. "Mummy and Daddy are home!"

Robby's wails grew even louder.

And then from his chair in the living room, Slappy heard Georgia and the Warrens utter screams of horror.

# 23

What had happened?

Slappy jumped off the chair. He had to see.

When he'd left the kid, Robby was sleeping peacefully.

He took a few steps towards the hall. He could hear Mr and Mrs Warren screaming furiously at Georgia.

"You hung him in the drapes?" Mrs Warren shrieked. "Are you crazy? Are you crazy?"

"I — I didn't!" Georgia protested weakly.

"Then how did Robby get up there?" Mr Warren demanded. "Someone tied him to the drapes. He didn't climb up there by himself!"

"Are you *crazy*!" Mrs Warren repeated. "Tie a baby to the drapes! Are you *insane*?"

"No. Listen to me —" Georgia's voice broke. "I don't understand it. I put him to bed. I —"

"Call her mother!" Mrs Warren shrieked to

her husband. "No. Call the police. This girl has to be locked up!"

Slappy stood in the middle of the living room listening, thinking hard.

Georgia didn't tie Robby to the drapes. That's ridiculous, he knew.

And I didn't tie up the little creep, either.

So . . . it had to be someone else.

And as Slappy had that thought, he heard Mr Warren declare, "What are these footprints? Look — muddy footprints!"

"S-someone else must have come into the house," Georgia stammered in a trembling voice.

"Huh? Someone in the house?" Mrs Warren cried. "Someone in the house — and you didn't know it?"

Slappy heard their footsteps. They were all making their way to the living room now.

He dived back on to the sofa and went limp just as they appeared.

Mrs Warren held Robby in her arms, soothing him, petting his hair with one hand. The boy snuffled quietly and sucked his thumb. But he seemed to be okay.

"I must have fallen asleep for a few minutes," Georgia told them. "I'm so sorry. I guess . . . I guess someone sneaked into the house while I was asleep."

"But who?" Mrs Warren started. "Why?"

"This doesn't make any sense," her husband muttered, shaking his head. He turned to Georgia. "You'd better leave."

"But —" Georgia started to protest.

"Just get your coat and leave," Mr Warren ordered. "Please. Go."

Georgia started to walk to the coat closet. "You're going to call my mum?" she asked timidly.

"I don't know!" Mr Warren snapped. "I don't know *what* to do about this. At least Robby's okay."

"He'll have nightmares for weeks!" Mrs Warren moaned, still petting the little boy's hair.

"I'm so sorry," Georgia murmured, tears glistening in her eyes. "I don't know what else to say. I'm just so sorry."

She pulled on her rain poncho, grabbed Slappy off the sofa, and ran out of the house.

The rain had slowed to a drizzle. A cold breeze shook the trees.

"Who did it?" Georgia cried, tears running down her face as she made her way down the Warrens' front path. "Who? Who? Who?"

Slappy had a pretty good idea.

He could see the footprints in the wet ground going round to the side of the house.

Little footprints.

Stella's footprints.

# 24

A few minutes later, Georgia sat at the kitchen table, huddled over a mug of hot chocolate. She kept taking deep breaths, forcing herself to stop trembling.

Slappy lay sprawled on his side on the kitchen worktop, where Georgia had dropped him.

Three good deeds, he thought bitterly. I did my three good deeds. I should be safe. I should be home free.

But that little brat upstairs had ruined them all. Wiped them all out. Thanks to her, another day has passed — and I'm still at zero.

Why is she doing this to me?

Is Stella so jealous of her sister that she's totally out of control?

Wrapping a kid in the drapes is something *I* would do just for fun, Slappy thought. But Stella? She must be totally unbalanced. She's *sick!*

Mrs Boonshoft faced the kitchen window, her back to Georgia, and talked in soft tones to Mrs Warren on the phone.

"Something is wrong here," she was saying. "Georgia would never do that. Georgia is so responsible. Something is definitely wrong here."

A few minutes later, she clicked off the phone and turned to face Georgia. "I'm afraid Mrs Warren still hasn't calmed down."

"I didn't do it, Mum!" Georgia wailed, slamming the mug down, hot chocolate splashing over the top.

"I know you didn't," her mother replied softly. She chewed her bottom lip. "I know you wouldn't do anything like that, Georgia. But do you have any idea who *did* do it?"

Georgia tried to swallow some hot chocolate but choked. She shoved the mug away from her. She motioned in the direction of her sister's room. "Mum, you don't think that Stella. . ."

Mrs Boonshoft sighed. "I don't know. Your sister has been doing such crazy things lately. But to sneak across the street in the rain and tie that little boy to the drapes?"

"After dinner, she kept asking me where I was going," Georgia reported. "She had to know. It seemed so important to her to know where I'd be."

Mrs Boonshoft narrowed her eyes thought-

fully. Then she stared hard at Slappy, sprawled on the counter. "Ever since that dummy arrived . . ." she muttered.

Georgia blinked. "What? What about Slappy?"

"Such terrible things have been happening," her mother replied. She pulled out a chair and sat down across from Georgia. She squeezed Georgia's hands.

"Ever since you brought that dummy home, your sister has just not been right. She always was jealous, I suppose. She always had to compete with you, Georgia. But when you brought that dummy home . . ."

"Mum, you can't blame Slappy!" Georgia protested. "Stella isn't interested in puppets or ventriloquism. She never was."

Her mother gazed at Slappy, frowning. "Georgia, maybe you could put Slappy away for a while. You know. Hide him away in a closet."

"But Mum —"

"Just for a little while," Mrs Boonshoft added. "Just until we get Stella straightened out." She sighed. "We have to deal with Stella. And if the dummy is creating a problem for her, it might make it a little easier if you put Slappy away for a while."

No way! Slappy thought. A wave of panic swept over him.

If they lock me in a closet, I'm history.  
I'm dead meat.

I'll never get my three good deeds done. And Jimmy O'James's curse will put me away for ever.

That settles it. I have no choice. I have to take care of Stella. While she's still around causing trouble, I don't stand a chance.

"Mum, I can't put Slappy away now," Georgia said, shaking her head, tears brimming in her eyes. "I've been working so hard on an act with him. That just isn't fair."

Her mother stood up. She suddenly looked very tired. "Just think about it, okay, Georgia?" she said wearily. "I know you want things to be okay around here again. So . . . think about it."

"Okay, Mum," Georgia agreed. She took one last sip of hot chocolate. Then she gathered up Slappy and made her way to her room.

"What are we going to do, Slappy?" she asked him, holding him up in front of her. "Mum wants to blame everything on you. But it's not your fault. What are we going to do?"

She put him down carefully on the floor at the foot of her bed.

*I know what I'm going to do, Slappy thought.*

He waited until Georgia was asleep. Then he stood up, balling his wooden fingers into tight, hard fists.

And stepped across the hall to Stella's room.

# 25

As he crept silently into the dark room, Slappy thought of different ways to put an end to Stella.

Smother her? Strangle her?

Yes, I'm evil, he told himself. I'm as evil as they come.

And proud of it.

The toy-maker who built me was an evil sorcerer. At least, that's what I read in the journal he left.

He built me out of wood from a stolen coffin. And when this man of evil powers died, all of his evil went into me.

It's what keeps me alive.

Evil is *live* spelled backwards.

He gave me life. And now I will use the evil he gave me to *keep* myself alive.

Sorry, Stella.

I know this is going to hurt your family very much. I know they are going to miss you.

But when your sister Georgia is crying and grieving over you, I will help to cheer her up.

And that will be a good deed for me.

I'm going to stay alive. No matter what it takes — I'm going to stay alive!

He shuffled over to the bed. The blankets were bunched up in the middle. The sheet was pulled over Stella's head.

Goodbye, Stella, Slappy thought bitterly. It's been great.

He grabbed the sheet and started to pull it down.

A flash of bright white light made him gasp.

And a voice from behind him — Stella's voice — shouted: "Gotcha!"

# 26

Large white and yellow dots flashed in his eyes.  
Slappy tried to blink them away.

He spun round to find Stella standing across the room. She had a Polaroid camera raised in front of her. "Gotcha, Slappy!" she declared triumphantly.

"Hey —" he choked out.

"Now I can prove it!" Stella cried, holding the square snapshot high above her head. "Now I can show my mum that I'm telling the truth about you!"

Slappy gaped at her in horror. What is her problem? Does she really think she can defeat ME?

With a furious cry, he leaped at Stella.

She staggered back. Hit the dresser hard.

Slappy grabbed the camera from her hands. He raised it high. Prepared to heave it across the room.

But Stella reached up and grabbed it back.  
Slappy dived at her again. Knocked her to  
the floor. Jumped on top of her.

The snapshot flew from Stella's hand. It  
floated under the bed.

They wrestled for the camera.

"You're dead meat! You're hisssstory!"

Slappy hissed.

He raised a hard, wooden fist. Prepared to  
bring it down on her face.

The ceiling light flashed on.

Slappy went limp.

"Stella!" Mrs Boonshoft cried, staring down  
at her daughter on her back on the floor with  
the dummy sprawled on top of her. "Stella!"

Georgia stepped into the room, rubbing sleep  
from her eyes. "What's going on?"

"The dummy walked in here!" Stella  
shrieked. "The dummy attacked me!"

"Please —" her mother begged. "Don't do  
this, Stella. I'm begging you."

"It's just a wooden dummy," Georgia cried.  
"Why are you saying these crazy things? It's  
just a big doll that someone built, Stella. It  
can't walk or talk. You know that. You know  
I'm telling the truth."

"I can prove it!" Stella exclaimed breath-  
lessly. "This time, I can prove it to you both!"

She lifted Slappy off her and shoved him  
across the floor.

He slid under the desk face down. His arms bounced once. Then he didn't move.

I don't believe this, he thought furiously. I don't believe this is happening.

"I can prove it!" Stella repeated. "This time, you'll *have* to believe me."

She scrambled to her feet. Crossed to the bed. Reached down and pulled up the snapshot she had taken.

"Here." She shoved it into Georgia's hand. "Here. My proof."

Georgia lowered her eyes to the photo — and gasped.

# 27

"What is it?" Mrs Boonshoft grabbed the photo from Georgia and raised it close to her face.

She studied it for a moment, then turned to Stella. "What does this prove?" she asked softly. "I — I'm very confused."

"It's very blurry," Georgia added. "It just shows Slappy leaning over your bed. You propped him up against your bed, Stella."

"No!" Stella screamed. She snatched the photo from her sister and gazed at it, concentrating hard. "No — I didn't prop him up against my bed. He — he sneaked into my room! Don't you see? He's pulling down my sheet. He thinks I'm in the bed. He's pulling down the sheet!"

"Stella, why are you doing this?" Mrs Boonshoft demanded. "Why are you trying to make us believe this wooden dummy is alive? What do you really want? What are you *really* afraid of?"

"Why can't you understand? I'm afraid of this dummy!" Stella shrieked. "He *is* alive! I'm telling the truth! I didn't fake this picture. It's *true!*"

Georgia and her mother both turned their eyes on the dummy. He lay sprawled face down under the desk where Stella had tossed him.

His eyes stared glassily at the floor. His legs were bent beneath him, big shiny shoes flat against the carpet.

A lifeless dummy of wood and cloth.

With an angry cry, Stella stormed across the room — and kicked Slappy. Kicked him in the midsection with her bare foot.

He bounced up, his hands clattering against the desk's legs.

She kicked him again. Kicked him again.

"Get up!" Stella screamed. "Show them I'm telling the truth! Show them I'm not crazy! Get up! Get *up!*"

Mrs Boonshoft took Stella by the shoulders and held her back. "Stop. Please — stop," she whispered, hugging her tightly.

She turned to Georgia. "Take the dummy — now. Take it into your room. And put it away."

"Okay, okay," Georgia replied. She pushed past Stella and picked up Slappy by one arm. "But I can't lock him up, Mum. You *know* I'm taking him to school tomorrow."

Huh? School? Slappy thought. Why is she taking me to school?

# 28

"Slappy — why are you so bad?" Georgia asked.

"Because I'm made out of *naughty* pine!" she made him reply in a high, squeaky voice.

A few kids laughed, mostly sarcastic laughter.

"And have you always been a dummy?" Georgia continued.

She made Slappy blink his eyes. "Are you trying to insult me?" he squeaked.

"No. Have you been a dummy all your life?"

"No. Have *you*?" Slappy asked.

A few kids groaned. Someone threw a milk carton across the canteen.

"The jokes don't get any prettier!" Georgia made Slappy say. "But neither do your *faces*!"

Georgia's throat suddenly felt as dry as cotton. Her hands were cold and wet. She didn't think she'd be this nervous.

After all, most kids weren't even listening to her act. They were talking to each other across

the canteen tables, laughing, eating their lunches.

Most of them weren't paying any attention at all. But Georgia still felt nervous.

A lot of kids performed here at lunchtime. It was a school tradition. And some of them were pretty good. The week before, the school jazz band had got a standing ovation.

Georgia really wanted kids to like Slappy and her new comedy act. But she was getting only groans and sarcastic laughter.

"Slappy, we need better jokes," she muttered to him. "I need to work a lot harder on this act."

You sure do! Slappy thought. You're pitiful.

But he wasn't thinking about the act. He was thinking about how little time he had to do three good deeds.

Only three days left.

"Slappy, do you know why hummingbirds hum?" Georgia was asking.

She moved the control in his back and made his eyes go wide. "No, Georgia. Why do hummingbirds hum?"

"Because they can never remember the words!"

A few kids laughed at that one.

A boy at the front table burped really loudly.

The burp got a much bigger laugh than Georgia's joke.

She sighed and glanced up at the clock above

the window that looked in on the school kitchen. Ten minutes to go until the bell rang.

I don't have enough jokes for ten minutes, she realized. I'll do a few more and then stop while I'm behind!

She took a deep breath and plunged into the next joke. "Slappy, tell me, why do elephants never forget?"

Even though she made his mouth move up and down, Slappy didn't even hear the answer. Something caught his eye.

Something behind the window that looked into the kitchen.

Slappy saw a flash of purple back there. A purple cap.

Stella?

He stared at the cap in shock. His shock quickly turned to anger.

Why is Stella hiding in the kitchen, spying on us? he wondered.

She doesn't even go to this school. Why is she here?

Why is Stella stalking me? Trying to ruin everything I do? Trying to destroy me?

Something snapped in his brain.

He couldn't take it any more.

I have to know why she is here. I have to know...

With a hard jerk, he pulled free from Georgia's grasp.

He slid from her lap and landed standing up on the floor with a hard *THUD*.

All around the canteen, he heard kids gasp and cry out.

“The dummy fell!”

“Look — it’s *walking*!”

“How does she *do* that? Is it on strings?”

“The dummy is a *robot*!”

“No! It’s . . . *alive*!”

Georgia uttered a startled cry and reached for him.

But Slappy took off.

I’m going to confront that brat once and for all, he decided.

Tightening his hands into hard fists, he ran towards the kitchen. His shoes clattered loudly on the hard floor.

Kids screamed and shrieked.

He heard Georgia calling to him: “Slappy! Slappy!”

He lurched into the kitchen.

Stella stood by the window. She had her back to him.

He grabbed her shoulders with both hands. Spun her round.

And screamed.

# 29

Slappy stared *into his own face!*

Not Stella. Not Stella in the purple cap.

Wally!

The other dummy. His identical twin.

"You!" Slappy gasped. He ripped the cap off the dummy's head and sent it sailing across the kitchen.

"You!"

The dummy with his face — *his face* — grinned back at him, dark eyes flashing merrily.

"You're the one!" Slappy screeched. "You ruined all my good deeds. You trashed Georgia's room. You pushed that girl's wheelchair down the hill! You —"

"Of course," Wally rasped softly. His grin appeared to grow wider.

"You — you —" Slappy sputtered in disbelief.

"Of course it was little old me," Wally replied, giggling.

"But — why?"

"Because I want to live!" Wally declared. "And the only way for me to live . . . is for you to DIE! I can't let you do any good deeds. I have to make sure you fail!"

"But you can't —" Slappy started.

He didn't get a chance to finish.

With a furious cry, Wally leaped at him. Knocked him to the floor. Began pounding his head against the tiles, screaming: "DIE NOW! DIE NOW! DIE FOR EVER, SLAPPY!"

# 30

Pain shot through Slappy's head. Again. Again.

The bright white kitchen ceiling lights flashed in his eyes.

As Wally battered Slappy's head against the floor, the light began to fade.

The frightened shouts and screams from all round the kitchen brought Slappy back. He opened his eyes and saw the cooks and kitchen staff huddled against the refrigerators at the back. The door to the kitchen was jammed with curious kids.

"DIE, SLAPPY!" Wally shrieked. He shoved Slappy's head down again.

But Slappy reached up both wooden hands — and plunged them hard into the other dummy's midsection.

Slappy rolled out from under Wally. Jumped unsteadily to his feet.

His eyes swept over the kitchen. All a blur. The frightened kitchen staff in their aprons.

The screaming, startled kids. The dark steel ranges with their big, steaming pots of food.

With a growl, Wally dived at Slappy, grabbing for his head again.

Slappy dodged away. He lurched into an oven door and bounced off.

Wally spun round and prepared to come at him again.

With a groan, Slappy hoisted a huge, bubbling stew pot off the range.

And heaved it at the other dummy.

"AAAAIIII!" Wally uttered a scream of agony as a heavy wave of boiling pea soup splashed over him. His arms and legs twitched and flailed. He sputtered as the thick soup oozed down over his head.

Burning him. Scalding him.

Still groaning in pain, he staggered towards Slappy.

Slappy grabbed a long food tray off a counter. Macaroni and cheese bubbled up over the sides.

As Wally stumbled across the room, wiping thick green soup from his face, from his eyes, Slappy dumped the macaroni over Wally's head.

Wally cried out again.

Made a desperate grab for Slappy.

Kids screamed.

A few teachers pushed past the crowd at

the doorway, eyes wide with confusion and surprise.

Wally's shoes slid in a big puddle of pea soup and macaroni. He fell face down on to the floor.

Slappy moved to pin him down.

But to his surprise, Georgia stepped in front of him.

Eyes wild, her face bright red, she pressed her hands against her waist and moved to block his path.

Now what? Slappy thought.

Am I going to have to destroy her too?

# 31

"Slappy!" Georgia cried. "Stella didn't lie. You are alive! What is happening? Explain it to me!"

He uttered a low growl and struggled to get round her. He knew he had to destroy Wally — or he would die.

"Slappy —" she repeated.

*"Out of my way, idiot!"* he screeched.

Georgia gasped. "You — you *talk*!"

Slappy reached for Wally. Georgia stepped in front of him.

With a frustrated cry, he grabbed her round the waist — and shoved her across the room.

Georgia stumbled back.

Slappy lifted a metal pan of spaghetti — and pushed it in her face.

Screaming and sputtering, she scraped at her face with both hands, shaking burning-hot tomato sauce from her hair, pulling gobs of steaming noodles from the top of her head.

Slappy leaped at Wally. The two of them

toppled to the floor. They wrestled in the slop of pea soup, macaroni and spaghetti sauce. Rolling over each other, flailing and punching wildly, biting at each other with snapping jaws.

“Stop them!”

“Somebody — stop them! *Do something!*”

“Someone — call the police!”

Screams rang out through the kitchen.

Slappy jammed his fist hard into Wally’s open mouth.

Wally clamped his jaws shut on Slappy’s hand.

And then, to Slappy’s shock, he felt himself being lifted up. Lifted off the floor.

Wally rose up in front of him.

It took Slappy a few seconds to realize that someone had grabbed him up by his jacket collar.

He turned and saw Georgia. Spaghetti sauce ran down her hair and face on to her sweater. She was panting hard, her eyes narrowed in anger.

“No more. . .” she murmured.

Slappy squirmed, struggling to free himself.

But Georgia kept her grip on his jacket.

She had Wally in her other hand, Slappy saw.

The two of them kicked and twisted.

“*Let go, you fool!*” Slappy ordered her.

“*Let go now so that I can FINISH him!*”

"No more. . ." Georgia murmured again.  
She raised the thrashing, kicking dummies  
high — and heaved them towards the open door  
of some machine against the wall.

The kitchen passed by Slappy in a blur as he  
hurtled across the room.

He gasped as he recognized the machine  
Georgia had tossed him into.

The open machine.

The huge rubbish compactor.

He recognized it, but he didn't have time to  
scream.

He plunged through the open door, Wally  
jammed close beside him.

Before the pain shot through him, Slappy  
heard the grinding sound. Low at first, just a  
rumble — then a deafening roar.

The pain started at his feet. Roared quickly  
up his legs, his body.

Wally and Slappy both uttered cries of agony.

Their last cries, as the rubbish compactor  
roared and chewed them. Chewed them to tiny  
chunks of sawdust and cloth.

Chewed them to darkness. . .

# 32

With a shrill scream, Slappy blinked open his eyes.

He sat up with a jerk.

His body trembled.

His wooden jaws chattered.

He blinked several more times as the harsh light invaded his eyes.

I'm dead? he thought. Is this what it's like?

The room came into focus. A familiar room.

He recognized the chair. The dressing-table with its dust-smeared mirror. The metal chest resting open against the cracked plaster wall.

The dressing-room?

Slappy's mouth dropped open.

Am I back in the theatre dressing-room?

Jimmy O'James shimmered into view, leaning over him. "Slappy?"

Slappy stared up at him, speechless for once.

"Slappy? Are you okay?" Jimmy asked. "What's

wrong with you? Why were you twitching like that? You kept crying out in your sleep."

Slappy blinked again. "I . . . I suppose I was having a nightmare."

Jimmy sniggered. "A dummy having a nightmare," he muttered. "That's a good one."

He frowned down at Slappy. "Knowing *your* evil mind, it must have been a nasty nightmare."

"It — it was!" Slappy stammered. "It was my *worst* nightmare! I dreamed I had to do three good deeds!"

Jimmy shook his head. "You must have been horrified. Listen, you and I have to talk."

But Slappy didn't hear him. The dummy had jumped to his feet and was doing a joyful dance across the dressing-room floor.

"I'm alive!" he cried. "I'm alive!"

He danced and twirled and clapped his hands gleefully above his head.

"All a dream! Whoooooeeee! I'm alive! Slappy lives! Slappy *lives*!"

"Slappy —" Jimmy stepped in front of him to stop the dance. "Did you hear me? You and I have to talk."

Slappy dropped on to the edge of a trunk and tilted his head up at Jimmy. "What about, creep-face?"

"I can't perform with you any more," the ventriloquist said, crossing his arms in front of

his chest. "I can't let you hurt any more kids. You are too evil. You cannot perform again."

Slappy tossed back his head in a cruel laugh. "What choice do you have, Jimmy-Boy? I'm all you've got."

"No. You're finished. You are history, Slappy," Jimmy insisted.

The dummy jumped to his feet. "You know what? I'm not taking any more lip from you. I'm going to run the show from now on. I'm putting you out to pasture! You've outlived your usefulness. *I'm* the act — not you! I —"

Slappy was interrupted by a loud knock on the dressing-room door. A man in a brown uniform dragged in a large pinewood crate. "Delivery for you, Mr O'James."

Jimmy thanked him and bent down to open the crate.

Slappy laughed. "How wonderful! Just the right size for your coffin, Jimmy! What good timing!"

Jimmy ignored him. "I wonder who sent me this," he muttered. He prised open the lid. "Whoa!"

The inside of the crate was lined with purple velvet. Stretched out on the bottom was a ventriloquist's dummy.

"It's your identical twin!" Jimmy declared, scratching his head in amazement. "Can you believe it?"

Slappy didn't reply.

Jimmy reached down by the dummy's feet and pulled out a stack of yellowed papers.

He examined them quickly. When he turned to Slappy, he had a wide grin on his face. "Guess what, Slappy? Sometimes nightmares come true!"

Jimmy lowered his eyes to the page and quickly began to read the curse.